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THE

# ELDERSHIP

OF THE

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.**



A

## **SERMON,**

PREACHED BEFORE THE

**Charleston Union Presbytery,**

**APRIL 4th, 1836.**

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BY THE

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PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHARLESTON.

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**DEDICATED**  
TO THE  
SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES,  
FOR THE  
PROMOTION OF WHOSE WELFARE,  
THE FOLLOWING SERMON  
WAS WRITTEN,  
AND  
IS NOW PUBLISHED.



## PREFACE.



THE following discourse was delivered before the Charleston Union Presbytery at one of its regular meetings. The hope that it may do good, by calling the attention of our Churches to the nature, duties, and character of the Eldership—by exciting inquiry into this subject—by calling attention to its present woful condition—by imparting a stronger conviction of its importance, dignity and necessity—and by leading to the adoption of such measures, as will restore it to its designed influence in the Church of Christ—this he humbly trusts is the author's motive for sending it forth to the Christian public. In doing so, he has acted not merely on his own judgment, but by the request and advice of those who are capable of determining the adaptation of this discussion to the end in view.\*

Before the reader enters upon the perusal of this Sermon, he is requested to read the following remarks, which will possibly prepare him to examine it with more candour, and a greater willingness to admit its principles, and to act upon its suggestions.

It has been thought by some, that the plan of action here laid down for Elders, though followed in "the olden times," and in European Churches, is not accordant to the system of the Presbyterian Church in these United States, and even if it were, altogether impracticable.

We think it, however, very demonstrable, that this plan is acknowledged by our Church in this country, implied in or required by our Book of Discipline, and followed by many of our Congregations. In illustrating our positions, we have quoted chiefly from foreign writers, because we believed their views would come to the minds of those who heard, with more of the power of freshness and originality, and free from any of the weakening influence of prejudice.

\* It may be proper here to state, that one gentleman who has urged the author to publish this discourse, freely meets all its expense.

That this plan is however acknowledged by the Presbyterian Church in this country, will be evident, if we remember, that the Kirk of Scotland is her model—that she has adopted her standards—that whatever she has modified or altered, has had no reference to this subject—and consequently, that the office of the Eldership is regarded by her in the same light in which it is considered by that earlier Church. The truth in this matter can be brought to a very certain test. Let us retrace the history of our Churches in this land, and as we gradually approach their origin, do we not find this system more and more perfectly followed? And is it not the unquestionable standard by which the character of Elders was then estimated?

It is also implied in our Book of Discipline. “Ruling Elders are properly the representatives of the people, chosen by them for the purpose of *exercising government and discipline, in conjunction with pastors and ministers.*”\* But if the duties laid down in this Sermon are omitted, what government and discipline, in conjunction with their pastors, can Elders exercise? Again—in the form of ordaining Ruling Elders, one question to be propounded is this, “Do you accept the office of Ruling Elder in this Congregation, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof?”† What duties, but those which they had ever been accustomed to perform? Is not this as necessarily implied in the subsequent question put to the people, which requires that they should express their willingness to yield all that honour, encouragement and obedience in the Lord, to which his office, according to the word of God, and the constitution of this Church entitles him. Again—we ask what duties but those referred to can they be, which age or infirmity can render a man incapable of performing?‡—for it will be shewn, that the distribution of the elements at the Lord’s table, is no necessary part of the duties of an Elder. And for what other purpose is the Elder so solemnly ordained, and invested with almost as much spiritual authority as the Minister? The early decisions of the General Assembly, in which Elders are required to be faithful in the discharge of these duties, and especially in those of family visitation and catechetical instruction, make our interpretation of the form of government indis-

\* See Form of Government, Chap. v.

† See do. do. Chap xiii. § 3.

See do. do. do.

putable!\* When the Synod of New-York and Philadelphia united in 1758, they agreed on this principle. "We do still receive the same (that is the Confession and Catechisms) as the confession of our faith, and also the plan of worship, government and discipline contained in the Westminster Directory." And Dr. Miller, who has examined this subject as thoroughly, at least, as any other man, when he comes to speak of the nature and duties of the office, seems to intimate that he had now passed over what was contested, and entered upon what was plainly acknowledged,† while his schedule of duties and qualifications will be found even more ample than that presented in this discourse. Similar duties are assigned to this office, by the Lutheran Church in this country.‡ In the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline, adopted in 1648, and in force in all the New-England Colonies, until superceded in Connecticut by the Saybrook Platform in 1708, the duties of Ruling Elders, passing over what relates to discipline, are thus described—"5. To be guides and leaders to the Church, in all matters whatsoever pertaining to Church administrations and actions. 6. To see that none in the Church live inordinately, &c. 7. To prevent and heal such offences in life, or in doctrine, as might corrupt the Church. 8. To feed the flock of God with a word of admonition. 9. And as they shall be sent for to visit and pray over their sick brethren. 10. And at other times as opportunities shall serve thereunto."§ Such are the views of this office, taken by early American Divines, as the Rev. John Cotton,|| John Davenport,¶ Cotton Mather,\*\* Dr. Dwight,†† not to mention many others.

And this system is still pursued by very many Churches in our country. In the Rules of an Association of Elders of the Second Presbytery of Philadelphia, it is most explicitly and fully laid down, as that which they felt incumbent upon them as Elders in the Presbyterian Church.‡‡ In the central Presbyterian Church in the same city, "the Session have resolved as a standing rule, that they will visit

\* See extracts from minutes of the Assembly, Philad. 1803, pp. 144, 196, 3, 150. See also, the Assembly's Digest, pp. 111, 112, 114, &c.

† Miller on the Nature and Duties of the Eldership, p. 193.

‡ See Schmucker's Theology, Appendix, p. 374.

§ Chap. vii. 2, see texts quoted. || Miller on Eldership, p. 151.

¶ Miller on Eldership, p. 152. \*\* Do. p. 157. †† Theology, vol. 5, p. 251.

‡‡ See Rules of An Association, &c:

the Church members at least once in six months."\* And such, doubtless, is the fact, in regard to very many other Churches in our land.†

Now if this is so evidently the system acknowledged by the Presbyterian Church in this country, implied in its standards, and pursued by those Congregations which act most fully on the principles of Presbyterianism—and if this system is thus adopted, because it is believed to be scriptural—on what pretence will it be said that it is impracticable. What is the true source of difficulty? Is it in the system, or in those who are called upon to pursue it? Has it arisen from the fact that Christians would not receive the visits, or advice, or prayers, or instructions of their Elders, or because Elders have ceased to visit and advise, and pray with, and instruct the people? In a Congregation where Pastoral Visitation, or Lectures, or faithful admonitions have been long neglected, it is very difficult to introduce these most necessary and useful exercises of the ministerial function. But are these, therefore, unfit means for promoting the spiritual well-being of a Church? Surely not; and neither is the fulfilment of all the duties of the Eldership unnecessary or improper, because these duties have been long neglected. It may not be possible at once to restore to our Churches this system in all its fullness, but we may gradually prepare the way for its introduction, by setting it before them as the standard of necessary attainment, towards which they should continually aspire. A similar course is pursued in the Methodist and other Churches, and with the most blessed results, and why not in the Presbyterian Church? Let not the scheme be pronounced Utopian, until it has first been proved and found wanting. The author is unwilling to think that we have so far degenerated as Christians, that what our fathers found to be the very life and soul of the Church, we cannot or will not preserve; and if this discourse will lead any Churches to the re-establishment of an efficient, active, zealous, prayerful and devoted Eldership, he will be abundantly repaid for all his labours. And may God lead to this desirable and most needful result, and to his name will be all the glory.

\* See Manual of the Central Presbyterian Church, &c. p. 47.

† In a Presbyterian Church in a city not distant from Charleston, the Congregation is divided into districts, each under the charge of one Elder, who visits the families under his care once every month.

# SERMON.

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FATHERS AND BRETHREN,—

I AM permitted, in the providence of God, to address you this evening, not merely in the ordinary capacity of a Minister of Christ, but as the present presiding Bishop of this Presbytery. Called to open another meeting of this important ecclesiastical judicatory, which may never find us all again assembled to participate in its deliberations, it will be very properly expected, that I should call your attention to whatever the interests of our Church, and the cause of its Divine Head, may seem most to require.

On such occasions as the present, it is very customary to bring that truth home to the bosom and consciences of the Ministers of Christ, which they from sabbath to sabbath impress upon their hearers. This, my brethren, is well. Our work is one of incomparable difficulty, toil and labour. It is one, which requires for its proper discharge, the union of every qualification of the intellect, the will, and the heart. It is a work, which eclipses by its grandeur all sublunary occupations, and gives to all others the aspect of littleness, and comparative worthlessness. From its absorbing interest, and its unceasing demands upon the judgment, the memory, and the time, it is eminently delusive in its influence upon the feelings of *him* who is engrossed in its official duties, by leading away his attention from his own personal condition and

character, to the wants and woes of dying souls around him. Hence, the necessity for that watchfulness, humility, and self-examination, which should characterize the Minister of Christ. Hence, the wisdom of such associations as the present, where we may bring each other to the standard of comparison, and thus make observation upon the present aspect of our spiritual nature. And hence, too, the importance, on such solemn occasions, and with all the weight of delegated authority and power, of exhorting one another, and admonishing one another, and urging each other by all the motives which heaven and hell can offer, to greater devotedness, holiness, and prayer. Let us, then, brethren, in this sacred pause of public duty, as we are now in the presence of our master, convened in his name, and for the promotion of his glory, examine our own hearts and prove our own selves, whether we be in the faith, rooted and grounded in Christ, and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel.

It is, however, equally important and proper, that with the increased interest this occasion gives, our attention should be directed to the other officers of the Church, and that their pure minds should also be stirred up by way of remembrance. It was never designed by Christ, and we know it was not believed by his Apostles, that the whole burden of the spiritual concerns of the Church, should be borne by its unaided Pastors. Elders, a class of officers which had existed under the Mosaic Economy, and in the Jewish Synagogues, were therefore divinely appointed, that they might be associated with Pastors in the rule and government of the Church of Christ. And we have been increasingly of the opinion, that in the proper discharge of their functions, in connexion and co-operation with the Pastor, lies the whole strength, beauty and symmetry of that form of government we so confidently believe to be derived from the word of God. We have therefore thought, that we would be doing most service



to the cause of the Redeemer, especially in this Southern Zion, by bringing before you, and before the Elders and Members of our Churches, on this interesting occasion, this most important subject.

With the Apostle Paul, (1 Timothy, v. 17.) we would therefore say,

“LET THE ELDERS WHO RULE WELL BE COUNTED WORTHY OF DOUBLE HONOUR.”

We shall not occupy your attention with the discussion of the scriptural origin of such officers. This question has been often and ably examined, and especially by Dr. Miller, in his work on the Nature and Duties of the office of Ruling Elder. The following positions are laid down and maintained in the work referred to; that this office is found in the Old Testament economy—had plainly a place in the Apostolic Church—is recognized by a number of the early Fathers, as existing in their day—the witnesses of the truth in the darkest times, and the great body of the reformers sanctioned and retained it as of divine appointment—some of the most learned of the Episcopal and Independent divines since the reformation, have borne decisive testimony to this office as of apostolical authority—and some such is manifestly indispensable to the purity and order of the Church.\*

We find a plurality of Elders in every Church organized by the Apostles, and a distinction made among these Elders; some being described as ruling, and others as, in addition to ruling, labouring in word and doctrine. The Church of Christ being a society under the government of spiritual laws and regulations, and in the enjoyment of ordinances designed to promote its peace, happiness and prosperity, there must of necessity be officers

\* See Miller on Eldership, pp. 191, 29; Dick's Lect. on Theol. vol. iv. p. 379, &c.; Calvin's Institutes; Maastricht Theologia; Turretini Instit.; Stapferi Instit.; Harmony of the Confessions of the Reformed Churches, Lon. 1643, the eleventh section; Maurice's Social Religion; and Neal's History of the Puritans.

by whom these laws and ordinances may be regularly and properly administered. Not to speak of the worship of the Sabbath, the Sacraments and the other provisions of the sanctuary, discipline is as necessary to the well-being of any Christian, as it is of any civil community. A family in which there is no order, no regularity and no authority—a society in which there are neither rules nor officers—or any aggregate of human beings directed by no fixed principles, under the control of no power, and the restraint of no government—is a correct picture of that Church where there is no spiritual power, and in which that power is not exercised in the enforcement of its laws. Discipline is the application of those rules and principles given us in the word of God, for the promotion of peace, order and purity, and the preservation of consistency and devotedness. It is designed to sustain the authority of Christ—to uphold his government over the hearts and lives of his people—to preserve the Church from the wiles of hypocrisy and the disgrace of apostacy—to secure the fulfilment of heaven's commands, and the proper use of the instituted means of Christian improvement. Discipline will embrace the inspection of members and families—the admonition of the negligent—the reclamation of wanderers—the removal of scandal—the correction of irregularities—the reconciliation of differences—the visitation of *all*, especially the sick and the inquiring—the instruction of the young, the ignorant and distressed—the promotion of knowledge and piety—the careful admission of candidates—and the suspension or exclusion of such as act inconsistently or sinfully. It is therefore at once apparent, that the faithful maintenance of discipline in any Church, is necessary not merely to its prosperity, but almost to its existence. Certain it is that the purity and harmony of any Church will be found proportioned to the zealous, active fulfilment of these great duties. It is equally clear, that their

proper discharge requires the most consummate prudence, wisdom, piety and devotedness.

By whom, then, are these services to be rendered, and in whom is all this wisdom and discretion to reside? In the Pastor of a Church? In one single man, upon whom it is incumbent, to sustain the public exercises of religion—to feed the flock of God with knowledge—to administer the sacraments of the Church—to plan its movements—to conduct all its operations—to attend all its judicatories, and there sustain its interests and defend its claims? Is there any thing in the whole government of God, either in the kingdom of nature or Providence—is there any thing in the whole sphere of human action, so disproportioned to the end in view as such an arrangement would be? Atlas, bearing upon his own unassisted shoulders, the whole globe, with its millions of inhabitants, is the only counterpart to such an impossible achievement, which can be found in fact or fable. And even *were* such a task within the capability of any one man, would it be expedient or safe in the present condition of human nature, to entrust it to him?

We do not find in the New Testament, any Church committed to the guidance of one man, with all its multiplied interests devolving upon him. So far from it, there appears to have been in the Apostolic, and certainly in the primitive Churches, even more than one, and sometimes many *teaching and preaching Elders—each Church having its Pastor or Pastors, its Doctor, and frequently also, its Teacher or Schoolmaster.* But in addition to these, there were in every Church a body of Ruling Elders, called and ordained in the same manner as the Teaching Elders, who were associated with them as governments or helps: and who, while these gave themselves to the word and to prayer, were employed in the constant oversight and visitation of the Church.

Some such offices have been found necessary in every denomination, and were very generally restored by the Reformers. And where they have not existed, there, says Owen, "The Church has become weak and impoverished, it has degenerated into anarchy and confusion, its self-rule being managed with vain disputes and janglings to its division and ruin; or else it has been given up to the domination of some prelatical teachers, to rule it at their pleasure."

The Eldership in the view of the restorers of Presbyterian order to the Church of Christ, was regarded as a spiritual office, to which men were to be as regularly called and ordained, as to the Ministry of the Gospel, and possessing in its sphere, as much divine authority and sanction. The office was voluntary, and as those appointed to it were supposed to be engaged in some worldly occupation, only a limited portion of their time could be expected to be devoted to its duties. To become a Ruling Elder, no particular age was requisite, but as a man could become a Teaching Elder at the age of twenty-five, an individual of even fewer years, if otherwise qualified, could not be deemed unfit for a Ruling Elder, and in the present usage of the Church assuredly not. To be appointed an Elder, a man must be, according to the first Book of Discipline,† "of the best knowledge, judgment and conversation, and be lawfully called, according to God's word and order established in the Kirk, having soundness in religion, and godliness of life;" and according to the second Book of Discipline, drawn up in 1705, they are to be "men of the greatest prudence, gravity and interest in the parish."\*

As Elders were not Laymen, but were invested with a spiritual and holy office, their fitness was a matter of as

\* See Irving's Confessions of Faith, pp. 50, 72, 155. See also Knox's History of the Reformation, pp. 230, 232.

† Drawn up by John Knox.

faithful examination as that of the Preaching or Teaching Elder. To quote from an old Scotch writer of great authority on this subject, "The trial is to be by the Minister and Eldership of the congregation, or in case of their want of these, by the Presbytery. And they are to be tried, both in regard to their conversation, that it be blameless and holy, and also in regard of their knowledge and experience of the things of God, and of the affairs of his house, and of their ability and prudence for government."\* To be qualified for this office, a man should unquestionably be pious, spiritual in his character, possessed of self-government, not morose, imperious, irritable or haughty, actively zealous, well esteemed by the congregation, grave, prudent, unblameable in all his secular transactions and civil relations, a judicious manager of his own family, intelligent, well acquainted with the doctrines of the Bible, well skilled in the discipline of the Church, well acquainted with Christian experience, and with the nature of conversion and sanctification.† As ruling and governing the Church was the principal part of the Elder's employment, he was called Ruling Elder, that it might be at once perceived he had no power or authority to teach or preach. It was his duty to help, with the Pastor, to watch over the Church, both publicly and privately. The duties of an Elder were, therefore, of a more private, and a more public character. The private duties were, instruction, especially of the young—admonition and rebuke—comforting the afflicted—directing the weak and restoring the fallen—reconciling variances—praying—and visiting the sick. He was to strengthen the hands and encourage the heart of the Pastor—to stand by him in every difficulty—and to defend and uphold him by his prayers, and his advice; for in the first Book of Discipline, "the Elders are required to

\* See Presby. Rev. Nov. 1834, p. 43.

† See Engles' Tract.

watch upon all men's manners, religion and conversation that are within their charge, and to take heed to the doctrine, diligence, and behaviour of their Minister, and if need be, admonish and correct them.”\*

In their public capacity, the Elders, with the Pastor, constituted the Session or Church Kirk—one of them from each Church, in a given district, with the Pastor, formed the Presbytery—one with their Pastor from each Church in a larger sphere, a Provincial Synod—and deputies in equal numbers from the Presbyteries, the General or National Assembly. In these courts, Elders had power to sit, write, debate, and vote, and conclude in all matters handled therein. The things here treated of are matters of Faith, Doctrine, Order and Discipline. The power of Ruling Elders in conjunction with the Teaching Elders, according to the same old divine, who wrote about the time of the restoration, and who is supposed to be Guthrie, the martyr, is what is called, “1st. *Dogmatic*, whereby they judge of truth and error according to God's word only. 2. That which is called *Diatactic*, by which they discern and judge of the circumstances of those things which belong to the worship of God, as times, places, &c. 3. That which is *critic* or *corrective*, by which censures are exercised on the scandalous, and obstinate, &c. 4. That which is *exusastic*, by virtue of which they send, authorize, and give power to Church officers to serve in the house of God.” In the Second Book of Discipline, their duties are thus described. “As the Pastors and Doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the Elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people. It appertains to them to assist the Pastor in examination of them that cumis to the Lord's table: Item, in visiting the sick.”

\* Irving's Confessions, p. 51.

“They sould cause the actes of the assemblies, as weill particular as generall, to be put in execution cairfullie.

“They sould be diligent in admonishing all men of their deutie, according to the reul of the evangell. Things that they cannot correct be private admonitions, they sould bring to the Assembly of the Eldership. Their principall office is to hold assemblies with the Pastors and Doctors, who ar also of their number, for establishing of gude order, and execution of discipline. Unto the quhilk assemblies, all persons ar subject that remain within their bounds.”

Thus it appears that all that appertained to the welfare of the congregation, and the promotion of Christ's cause, was entrusted to their charge. Of such importance was the fulfilment of these duties deemed by the Reformers, that they were anxious to have men exclusively devoted to this work, and compensated for their labour. To obviate the difficulty, they made the number of Elders in each congregation large, and permitted them to alternate and relieve each other for a given time. The number of Elders was regulated by the extent and circumstances of each parish or congregation. The parish was divided into a number of districts. Each Elder had the charge of his own district. The names of all the people within each were drawn up by the Elder. It was his duty to visit them regularly, and report to the Pastor or Pastors, at the monthly meeting of the Kirk session. It was enacted, in 1648, that the Elders should visit once a month, *at least*, and report to the assembled session, what abuses are existing, and also make known to the Deacons, any cases of want which demanded their attention: and this is still the law of the Church of Scotland.\*

These duties, if devolved upon a few individuals, would be altogether disproportioned to the time they could be

\* See Tract on Eldership of Church of Scotland, p. 4.

supposed to spare from the ordinary avocations of life, but divided among a number, they would be light and easy. Thus, suppose a congregation to consist of one hundred families—let there be ten elders and ten districts, and let each Elder visit his district once a month. This would require each man to pay no more than five faithful, regular visits in two weeks. And who is there who with any love to Christ and the souls of men, could not find time to pay two visits per week, and discharge the other duties arising from his station? In a small parish in Fifeshire, in 1755, which contained only 996 souls, there were twenty-four Elders. In another small rural parish, there were, 150 years since, nearly thirty Elders.\* In Cyprian's Church, at Carthage, there were eight Elders. Soon after the Reformation, in the Church in Edinburgh, there were twelve Elders and sixteen Deacons. In 1560, four years before Calvin's death, there were twelve Elders in the Church of Geneva.†

Thus associated with their Pastor or Pastors, and thus faithful in the discharge of their appropriate duties, and thus regular in their review of the condition and wants of the Church—the Eldership will at once be seen to be the bone and sinew of a Church, its very marrow, its nerves, without which, let the head be ever so eloquent, devoted, and pious, the body must languish and decay.

Over all these stood the Presbytery, composed of the Pastors and Elders of many neighbouring Churches, which prevented the Pastor from lording it over the Elders, or the Elders over the Pastor. In the golden days of Presbyterianism, it was a regular part of Presbyterial duty, to appoint committees of visitation to each individual Church, whose duty it was to hear the Pastor preach, to examine the Pastor respecting the fidelity of his Elders and members, in their absence; and the Elders regarding their

\* Tract do. p. 5.

† Miller, &c. p. 271.



Pastor, in his absence, and the members respecting both; and report accordingly. As a curious specimen of such Presbyterian visitation, I will give the following, which has been preserved. It is extracted from the records of the Presbytery, of which the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine was a member, and is found in his life, by the Rev. D. Fraser.

*“At Portmoak Kirk, Sept. 20, 1710.*

“According to appointment, the Presbytery met here this day, and Mr. Erskine, minister of this congregation, preached to this text, Ps. xxiii. 4.—being his ordinary, wherein he was approven. Mr. — was interrogated.

1. If he gave due intimation of this visitation to the parish? Answered, Yes.
2. If his Session Book be in readiness in order to be revised? Answered, That the minutes are not yet filled up in the register. He was ordered to cause them to be filled up, to the end they may be revised.
3. If he preaches twice and lectures every Lord's day? Answered, Yes. And if he hath week-day's sermon? Answered, Yes.
5. If he intimates the Assembly's act against profaneness? Answered, He did read the same.
6. If he intimated the act against abuses by penny weddings? Answered, Yes, and speaks to the people to be married thereanent, and preaches against these abuses.
7. If he reads the Synod's act anent testimonials, and if it be inserted in their Session Book? Answered, Yes, and that he has administered the same thrice since (he) came to the congregation.
9. If all the parishioners attend the ordinances? Answered, He cannot complain.
10. If all the Elders attend the Session? Answered, Yes, except two, who have abandoned the same.
11. If they pray in their families? Answered, He thinks so.
12. Are they grave, pious, and exemplary in their lives? Answered, So far as I know.
13. Are they diligent, careful, and impartial in the exercise of their office? Answered, Yes.
14. Do the Elders call for testimonials from persons who come to reside in the parish? Answered, he does it

himself as he goes through visiting. 15. Does the Session appoint a ruling Elder to attend Presbyteries and Synods? Answered, Yes. Mr. Erskine removed. The Presbyteries are well satisfied with his answers to the aforesaid queries; and, being called in, this was intimated to him, and then removed.

“The Heritors were called; Mr. Kirkaldy compeared for Sir Robert Douglass of Kirkness, Bailie Steadman for Sir John Bruce, as also compeared Gospetrie, Geo. Burrell, and several other feuars in the parish, who were interrogated. 1. If their minister gave timeous intimation of his visitation? 2. If he had a Gospel-like conversation? 3. If he keep close by his work? 4. If he be careful of ministerial visits? 5. If he exercise discipline against delinquents? To which queries they answered in the affirmative.

“The Elders were then called, and the same questions proposed to them as to the Heritors. Then they inquired if all the Elders attend the Session? Answered, yes, except two. The Elders removed, the masters of families were called, and were interrogated as above. Mr. Erskine was called; he was interrogated if he discoursed these Elders who have abandoned the Session, why they did not attend the same? Answered, There was a Committee of Session appointed to discourse them thereanent, as the minute of the Session bears.”\*

If we wish to see the power and efficiency of such a plan, let us turn our eyes to Scotland, as she was some fifty years ago, when this system was in active operation, and when she stood forth to the world, unquestionably the most moral, intelligent, and religious community on the face of the globe. And it is our hope and prayer that the efforts now in progress for the restoration of the Eldership to its designed influence and power in that country, will be crowned with abundant success.

\* Life of Erskine, by Rev. D. Frazer.

My brethren, when we pass from the contemplation of the Eldership as it exists in the platform of our Church, and has been exhibited in its former history, not merely in Scotland but in Ireland, and in Continental Churches—to that Eldership as it now appears,—what a melancholy contrast is presented to our minds? Where are we to find those, who in the spirit of their office, in fidelity to their divine master, in fulfilment of their solemn and untransferable obligations, in the spirit of Christ, of love and holy devotion, give themselves to this work, and with earnestness, punctuality and zeal enter upon its duties?—Where are we to look for Elders who regularly visit the flock committed to their governance and care—who conduct the social meetings for prayer—who instruct the baptized children of the Church—who guide the anxious and inquiring mind—who follow up the ministrations of the pulpit by their private conversation, exhortation and prayers—who find out the wandering, bring in the outcast, reclaim the backsliding, and in deed and truth co-operate with him who laboureth in word and doctrine? A solitary Elder, or two or three superannuated and inactive men, for a Session, is here, as in Scotland, no uncommon spectacle. Even where there are more—their number is still very disproportionate to the extent of the congregation. And do not our Elders appear to be without any real apprehension of the true character and duties of their office? Is it not regarded as a mere human appointment, as that which they may conduct as they please, and whose duties they may measure by their inclination or leisure? Are not those elected by our congregations to this important office, who are in no manner qualified to fill it,—or who will not use their qualifications? And do not Christian men, professing to fear God and love the Saviour, even when God makes it apparent that he calls *them*, and would make them useful in this office, *if devoted to it in heart and purpose*, take it upon them to put it away from them, and

that, too, on the very ground that it demands effort, self-denial, sacrifice, devotedness, and that spirituality and active zeal which they are not disposed to exercise? And do not these Elders very generally imagine, that their duty is performed if they are present at the Session, if they stand to receive the contributions for the poor and other purposes, if they aid in distributing the funds, and officiate at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Whereas, all these duties, except that of composing a member of the Session, might be discharged by any individual acting under the authority of the Minister, and as it regards the poor, the Deacon alone is authorized to act, Elders having no Scriptural power in this matter. If, therefore, we deduct from the present functions of our Elders, their assistance at the Communion, and in the collection of funds, what services do they render to the cause of Christ?—in what respect do they promote the prosperity of the Church? What do they more than others?—and what account of their Stewardship will they render at the bar of Him to whose services they have been voluntarily and solemnly ordained? Is it not a fact, as it is said of Scotland, that there is no regular visitation of the parish—no seeking of the fruit in the people of the seed sown by the Minister—no admonishing of the backsliding—no exhorting of the weak—no reconciling of those who are at variance—no comforting of the desponding—no consoling of the afflicted—no supporting of the sick, and no praying with the dying.\* In short, adds this writer, they have nothing of the spirit and nothing of the efficacy of their office, and for aught of spiritual duty they perform, the Church might as well be without Elders altogether. Neither do they take their part in the more general government of the Church, by attending Presbyteries, and Synods, &c. The importance of duly performing their functions in this respect, is very great. It tends to take away that limited,

\* Preb. Rec. Jan. 1835, p. 163.

corporate spirit which is always likely to prevail in a body exclusively of the same profession and mode of thinking, and thus to improve the deliberations of the Church Courts, and at the same time to save the Church from that character of a Corporation of Ministers, which is so apt to produce a feeling of jealousy on the part of the people: while it further exhibits the Church in her true character, as comprehending not merely the Clergy, but all classes of the community.\* Our Elders, as a body, are not certainly such as they should be, and even were they in all respects such as they ought to be, yet would their number and their mode of action be totally unfit to accomplish the great objects for which this office was designed.

I am aware that there are exceptions to these remarks. Yes, blessed be God, there are many in our land, whose desire it is to do the will of him who hath called them, and to be faithful stewards. I am also aware, that in many of our Churches, as in my own, the present incumbents are far advanced in years, or are so situated in life as to find little opportunity for the full discharge of their office, and I trust also, that better days are dawning upon us,—but that such is the general character of the present Eldership of our Church, cannot, we lament to say, be even questioned.

Whence, then, is this sad declension, this mournful apathy, this death-like stupor, by which the Church of the living God is transformed into a valley of dry bones, with the voice of the preacher in vain calling upon them to live? It is to be traced, we think, in the first place, to the want of a more warm, operative, and energetic piety, and to the existence of that cold, calculating, selfish Christianity, which is scarcely sufficient to animate the dull form of worldliness in which it operates. Another source of this declension, is the ignorance of our Churches as to the real character, qualifications, authority and duty of the

\* Presb. Rec. Jan. 1835, p. 163.

**Eldership.** A third source of the evil will be found in the fact that great prejudices exist even among Elders themselves, against the introduction into this office of young, and well qualified and devoted Christians, lest, as is intimated by the writer already quoted, their inactivity should be disturbed, and their neglect of duty come under a more rigid observance. A fourth reason is the carelessness and indifference of Churches on this subject. If they can secure a Minister who will be popular enough to hold together the Congregation, they fold their arms to sleep, and casting all the burden of the Church on him, throw themselves, with all their powers and faculties, into the business or politics of the world, or at most into the mere temporal and outward concerns of the Church. A fifth reason is, the low estimation in which the character and office of the Elder is held by the people. Instead of being regarded as instituted by God, as of equal authority with the Ministry, and for equally important ends, to which they are under equal, though not perhaps as high obligations, and for the treatment of which they shall be held responsible—it is regarded as a mere sinecure, a mere nominal, unnecessary, and unimportant office. Connected with this, is the fact, that those who would give to the office that respectability, character, standing, and influence, which it ought to have, are unwilling to assume it, and it is thus thrown often upon the humbler members of the congregation, and is *then* in return despised or disesteemed by these very individuals themselves. Will God hold such Christians guiltless?

In what way may these evils be remedied? To this question a few remarks will be made in reply. These evils are to be corrected, in the first place, by the revival of pure and undefiled religion, without which even the things that remain will die. Secondly, by the diffusion of correct information on this subject, and this will be accomplished by preaching upon it—by inducing Elders to

attend Presbytery—by requiring their discharge of duty, and by putting into circulation those works in which these things are discussed.\* Thirdly, by training up young Christians in view of the claims of God and of the Church, upon their activity and talents. Finally, by giving more respectability to the office.\* This will be effected by the appointment of respectable men, who will be induced to act, when our people have correct views of the magnitude and importance of the office. In Scotland, and in many congregations in this country, ruling Elders will be found to be among the most honourable and wealthy members of the community. Fifthly, by restoring Presbyterian visitation and examination of the Churches. Sixthly, by increasing the interest of the meetings of Presbytery. Seventhly, much is also to be done by elders themselves. A Session in Scotland, consisting of twenty-four members, agreed every half year to have a meeting, and to put to themselves and to each other these questions.

Do you visit the sick in your quarter, exhort and pray with them?

Do you worship God in your family, morning and evening?

Do you instruct and catechise your children and family in the principles of religion?

Is there any unpurged scandal in your quarter of the parish?

Do you exhort the ignorant and children to diligence in acquiring the principles of religion?

Do you attend the judicatories of the Church when appointed?

Do you attend and encourage societies for prayer and Christian conference; particularly the monthly meetings of the Elders for that purpose?

Do you study to reconcile differences that occur in your quarter?

\*The author would recommend, for this purpose, Dr. Engles' Tract on the Eldership, forming No. 2 of the Tracts of the Presbyterian Tract Society.

Do you recommend religious and practical godliness in your quarter, by precept and example, and rebuke what is amiss?

Do you study, according to Christ's command, to reclaim offenders in private and secret, before you declare them to the Session?

Do you make conscience of declaring your mind, as to admitting and debarring from the Lord's supper, when the congregation roll is read sessionally, for that purpose?

Whatever may be the best mode of remedying existing evils, it is evident that something must be done, and that speedily. For otherwise the most disastrous results will follow. Ministers are now overburdened and broken down—the cause of Christ languishes, not because the field is not white unto the harvest, but because the labourers are few—errors of the most pernicious character are spreading their baneful influence through the Church, because Ministers have not time to study and to indoctrinate their people in the truth of God—the springs of benevolent operations stop, and there are none to keep them in order and in motion—and when a revival does take place in any Church, there are none to unite in gathering in the harvest, which is thus suffered to perish or to be greatly injured.

Had we time, we might shew how efficient our Church would become, were our Elders as numerous and as active as they should be.

“ A statement appended to the ‘Eldership’ as to the “moral machinery’ of the parish of St. John’s, Glasgow, of “which the great moving power is the eldership, affords “an admirable illustration of what might be effected, and “in a comparatively short period of time, were that part “of our establishment on the footing upon which it ought “to be placed. That parish, situated in nearly the worst “part of Glasgow, contains a population of 11,513. This “is about four times the proper extent of a single parish,



“ and the population is of a very inferior description. It  
 “ was only erected into a separate parish in 1818, when  
 “ it was nearly a moral wilderness. Happily falling un-  
 “ der the charge of Dr. Chalmers, he framed the machi-  
 “ nery in accordance with the standards of our church,  
 “ and as if to shew that it was to the *system* and not mere-  
 “ ly to the *man* that its efficacy was truly to be attributed,  
 “ he left it after a few years, and it has worked equally  
 “ well under both his successors. At present, besides the  
 “ minister with a salary of £425 guaranteed by the magis-  
 “ trates of Glasgow, but far more than covered by the  
 “ seat-rents, there is a chapel of ease built since the erec-  
 “ tion of the parish, the minister having a salary of £150  
 “ secured by bond on the part of private individuals,—four  
 “ missionaries at £50 each obtained by contributions from  
 “ the congregation,—twenty-seven elders,—twenty-three  
 “ deacons,—twenty-nine Sabbath school teachers instruct-  
 “ ing 1180 children,—four parochial schools attended by  
 “ 646 scholars,—two infant schools, and one female school  
 “ of industry,—while in this large mass of a working po-  
 “ pulation there are only eighty-six regular and eleven  
 “ non-regular paupers, and *all supported by the collections at*  
 “ *the church doors.* Great and valuable as are these fruits  
 “ of the exertions of the St. John’s eldership, it is yet far  
 “ from realizing all the advantages which ought to be at-  
 “ tained, and once in that very city were attained. The  
 “ total number of families in St. John’s parish is stated to  
 “ be 2585, while the number of elders being twenty-seven,  
 “ gives an average of ninety-six families under the charge  
 “ of each. Now it appears that in the interval between  
 “ the second Reformation in 1638 and the Restoration, the  
 “ city of Glasgow was divided into five quarters, each  
 “ having eighteen elders and as many deacons. Each  
 “ quarter or parish again was divided into proportions or  
 “ districts, with elders specially allotted to each, and the  
 “ division of one of these quarters, with the number of fa-

“milies and elders, we find engrossed in the session re-  
 “cords under date April 18, 1657, shewing us exactly the  
 “number of families allotted to each elder. The east quar-  
 “ter is there stated to be divided into eighteen propor-  
 “tions, corresponding to the number of elders, whereof  
 “twelve had twenty-nine families, and the remaining six  
 “nineteen families each, in all 402 families, or about 2000  
 “souls, distributed among eighteen elders, giving to each  
 “an average of twenty-two families, or about a hundred  
 “souls, instead of ninety-six families, or about 450 souls,  
 “as is the case at present in St. John’s. These eighteen  
 “elders were further required (and it was a duty which  
 “with so reasonable a portion of families under their  
 “charge, they could easily perform) to visit their propor-  
 “tion once a month, and oince every three months to give  
 “into the session a written report of its condition.”

Another illustration of the power of the eldership and  
 the strength it gives to the Church, may be found in a short  
 notice of one who filled this office for many years of his life.

“The late Patrick Falconer, Esq. was first called to the  
 “Eldership, in the Tron Parish, under the pastoral charge  
 “of Dr. Chalmers, and subsequently in St. John’s. Of all  
 “the active, laborious, and faithful men, with whom Dr.  
 “Chalmers was surrounded and supported, this gentle-  
 “man was in labours the most abundant, and in perseve-  
 “rance the most unwearied; and with one accord, we  
 “are sure, the Session of St. John’s will concede to their  
 “departed brother the pre-eminence in this work and la-  
 “bour of love. For the last seventeen years of his life,  
 “he gave all his leisure, and for the last ten, the whole of  
 “his time, to the duties of this office. Whilst many re-  
 “tired and fortunate merchants think they have no ac-  
 “count to render of their time to God, and loiter and  
 “lounge away the remainder of their days, barren of pro-  
 “fit either to themselves or the community,—this good  
 “man increased in well-doing, as he increased in years;

‘ whilst some grew weary of their labour of love, he grew  
 “ more devoted ; and whilst others doffed their spiritual  
 “ office, and shruuk into mere men of the world, he be-  
 “ came more single-hearted as he advanced in life, and  
 “ lived more exclusively for the glory of the Master whom  
 “ he served. Every day, when in health, was he to be  
 “ seen wending his way from his residence to the west end  
 “ of the city, to the farthest extremity of the east, where  
 “ his poor district lay ; and, punctual to his hour, the shop-  
 “ keepers inquired if all was well, when they missed his  
 “ familiar face and figure, or were defrauded, for a day,  
 “ of his passing salutation. Twice or thrice every year  
 “ he regularly visited each of the eighty-three families in  
 “ his district, besides his visitation of the sick ; and we are  
 “ assured that he was 300 days out of the 365 in his dis-  
 “ trict. No London magistrate ever acquainted himself  
 “ more laboriously with the worst districts of the metropo-  
 “ lis, in order to detect and punish, than this gentleman  
 “ did in his plebeian district, in order to prevent crime  
 “ and reform the criminal. On the practical experience  
 “ of this laborious office-bearer in the church, all good  
 “ men will set a just value ; and we feel, therefore, great  
 “ pleasure in giving that experience in his own words, as  
 “ conveyed to the Rev. Mr. Thomson of Dysart, four years  
 “ ago, in answer to a letter from that gentleman, request-  
 “ ing his opinion on this subject. Mr. Thomson informs  
 “ us that he read the letter to his own Session at its first  
 “ meeting, on which one of the brethren remarked, that it  
 “ had a *speaking language* ; and we now have great plea-  
 “ sure in adding it is a most suitable sequel to the preced-  
 “ ing remarks :—

“ “REV. AND DEAR SIR,—I duly received your much  
 “ esteemed letter of the 11th instant. It is with much  
 “ pleasure I sit down to attempt something answering the  
 “ object you have in view ; although, I am sorry to say,  
 “ that an exact detail of my procedure would not be so

“ much to that purpose as I could wish, or as it ought to  
 “ be. I shall therefore make use of it only as occasion  
 “ may offer, in the way of perhaps mentioning what I ex-  
 “ perience.

“ “ Allow me, then, to mention, in the first place, what  
 “ has often struck me with peculiar force, and which  
 “ is, that if a National Establishment answer at all its in-  
 “ tended purpose, it must supply a religious superinten-  
 “ dence to the *whole* of the country which adopts it; and  
 “ that, just as well in point of *penetrating the mass*, as of  
 “ *converting the surface*. Accordingly, it is always made  
 “ to extend over the whole of a country, by parishes, or  
 “ districts, such as were originally deemed what one min-  
 “ ister could superintend. But these districts remaining  
 “ locally the same, while the population in them has pro-  
 “ digiously increased, it is utterly impossible that a minis-  
 “ ter can do any kind of justice to them in any other way  
 “ than by calling in the assistance of laymen. This is  
 “ particularly the case in large towns, where, in conse-  
 “ quence of the inadequacy of the means of spiritual im-  
 “ provement, multitudes are in danger of sinking into a  
 “ state of ignorance and absolute heathenism.

“ To counteract and remove this great and growing  
 “ evil, it is clear that every possible effort should be made  
 “ by the friends of religion to render the Establishment as  
 “ efficient as may be, as that is the most effectual means  
 “ of reclaiming those who wander from the path of duty  
 “ and who feel as if no man cared for their souls. This  
 “ is, certainly, no easy undertaking. In the present state  
 “ of the country, a religious superintendence, in any de-  
 “ gree at all promising efficiency, can in no other way be  
 “ accomplished, but by a *numerous and vitally spiritual el-*  
 “ *dership*, or lay agency, operating in concert with the  
 “ parish minister. There must be a local system adapt-  
 “ ed to the wants of the parishioners, so as that the ground  
 “ be not only covered without omission, but thoroughly

“ pervaded—so thoroughly, indeed, that all may feel the  
 “ life and energy it is intended to infuse into their minds.  
 “ Sabbath school teachers, of course, would be considered  
 “ as forming a part of this agency.

“ ‘But to come to the eldership. Perhaps there is on  
 “ this subject a very general feeling that a man needs to  
 “ be disengaged from business, in some considerable de-  
 “ gree at least, before he can efficiently undertake this  
 “ office. My experience leads me to think, that a man  
 “ who can spare an hour a day, or even two hours a  
 “ week, may do as much good in that little time as one  
 “ who has the whole of his time at his disposal. Besides,  
 “ in the evangelizing of the world, it is evident the great  
 “ power must come from the *little* of each agent accumulat-  
 “ ed into the aggregate of the many. Each and every man  
 “ doing the little he can, is the source whence the irresis-  
 “ tible force at length is to come, which, in Christ, is to  
 “ overcome the deadness, darkness, and depravity which  
 “ now pervade the earth. I cannot, while on this point,  
 “ forbear to notice the importance of doing all to the glory  
 “ of God, and to be seen of Him, and of coming, not only  
 “ to the feeling of this, as our motive for doing, but also as  
 “ our excitement to do whatever we have within the com-  
 “ pass of our power. What I mean in calling attention  
 “ to this failing is that evidence not to withhold what we  
 “ can do because it is little. But, under any other feeling,  
 “ no individual will do any thing except it can be distinctly  
 “ seen as a great thing ; and this is the cause that vast  
 “ power, which might be collected from the many, is lost.

“ ‘Proper division of labour is also vastly important. If  
 “ an elder is disposed and peculiarly fitted to act spiritual-  
 “ ly, it is a great pity that any part of his time should be  
 “ taken up with what any man may do. The province of  
 “ the elder is quite distinct from that of the deacon ; and, to  
 “ render the parochial system efficient, each must abide  
 “ by his own proper calling. Various things, such as dis-

“tributing tracts, or missionary intelligence, or reading to  
 “those who cannot read for themselves, may be easily  
 “done by such as have no gift for exhortation or pray-  
 “er.

“ ‘The exact plan which I think best for a spiritual  
 “elder to adopt, and which I am decidedly of opinion is  
 “requisite to an efficient religious superintendence of a  
 “proportion, is that, along with the particular calls upon  
 “the sick, &c., he keep a regular progressive visit of the  
 “whole going on ; so that he may visit every family once,  
 “twice, or as often as may be, within the year. I think  
 “it very important that he do not allow himself to act as  
 “a judge or divider, nor even very much as an adviser, in  
 “worldly matters. It is astonishing how much time a  
 “single instance of that may take, when fully gone into,  
 “and perhaps may produce in the end no good whatever.

“ ‘Proportions should be small when a sufficient num-  
 “ber can be got ; the smaller, down to even two hundred  
 “souls, the better. Where a thorough pervading can be  
 “accomplished, it stimulates to the keeping of it up ; but  
 “where it is impossible, a vague ‘do at random, or not do  
 “at all,’ is apt to take place. In the progressive, or all  
 “over visits, the topics which generally have occurred to  
 “me as the easiest to be introduced, are those connected  
 “with the state of their children as to reading and religious  
 “instruction. Here a fine field for many important mat-  
 “ters opens to our view. Every elder should study to fill  
 “his mouth with arguments, in order to turn parental af-  
 “fection to the eternal interests of children, instead of al-  
 “lowing it to be absorbed entirely by their temporal con-  
 “cerns. ‘Seek first,’ says Christ, ‘the kingdom of God  
 “and his righteousness, and all these things shall be add-  
 “ed unto you.’ By securing salvation all is secured, by  
 “not seeking to secure it, is the sure way to lose all.  
 “Things present are too apt to engross our attention, as  
 “if they were the only objects of real importance ; yet we

“do not know how soon they may pass away, like the  
 “vision of a dream, for ever. How wise it is then to look  
 “steadily to the objects of faith, to give them their due  
 “place in our thoughts and affections, and to give a decided  
 “preference to that better part which shall not be taken  
 “away! We should keep eternity constantly in our  
 “view, and act under the felt impression of the unseen  
 “world. Every spiritually-minded elder will endeavour  
 “to press these things upon the people of his charge; he  
 “will be earnest to stir up parents to their religious du-  
 “ties. Families should be spoken to on the duty of fami-  
 “ly worship, and the daily reading of the word of God.  
 “The advantages of piety should be set forth to young  
 “and old, as claiming their highest regard. What a com-  
 “fort will be afforded to bereaved parents, to know that  
 “their children, who have been removed from them in  
 “early life, were brought up in the nurture and admoni-  
 “tion of the Lord! Or in the case of prolonged life, what  
 “a blessedness to have a well-founded prospect of happi-  
 “ness beyond death and the grave! This will support  
 “them under the trials and afflictions of life, and fortify  
 “them against the temptations to which they are exposed.

“With best regards, &c.

(Signed,) “PATRICK FALCONER.”

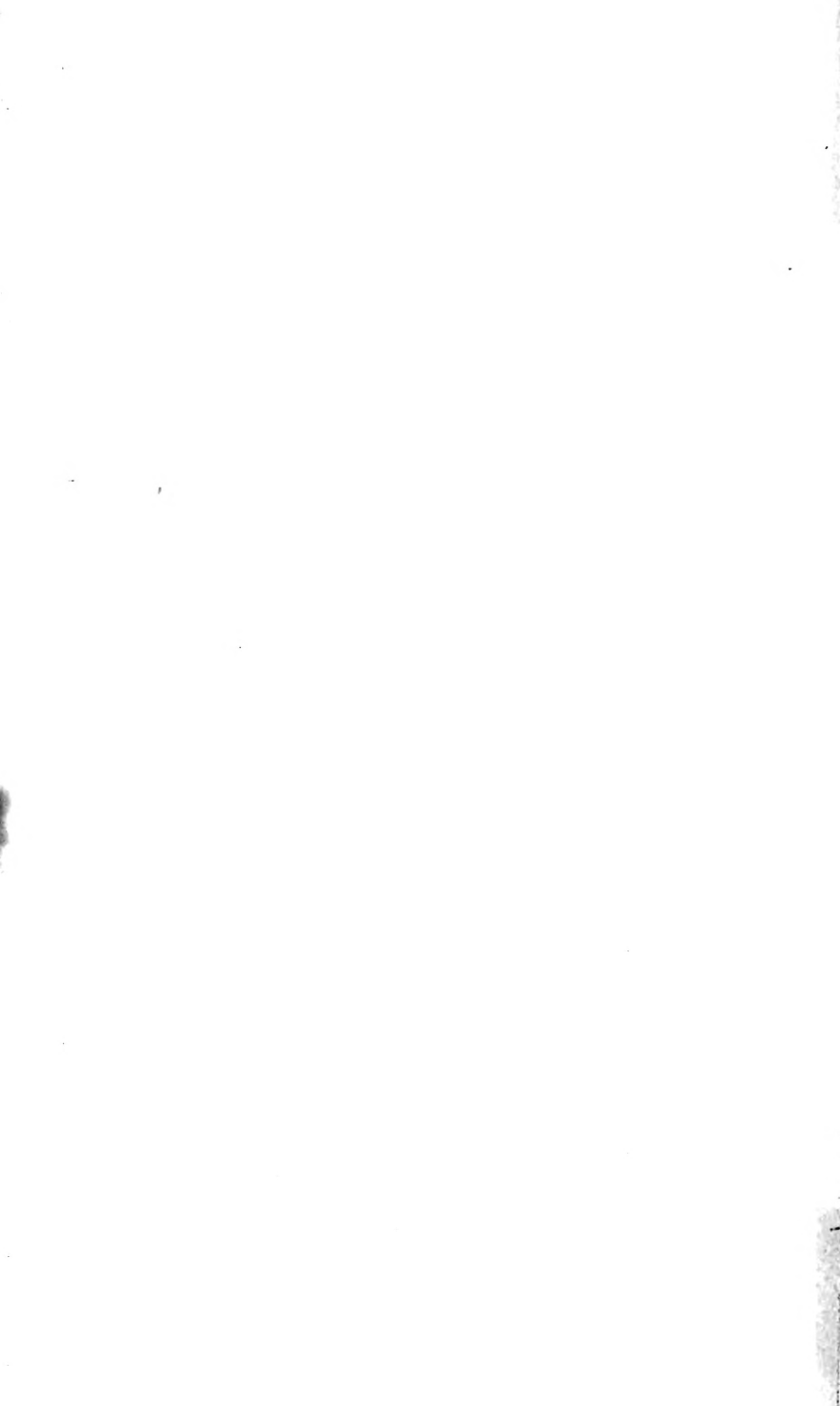
With such examples before us of the power, efficiency,  
 and usefulness of the office of the Eldership—and of the  
 practicability, in any ordinary circumstances of business, of  
 the duties it requires, are we not called upon, as we regard  
 the purity, the peace, the stability, and the increase of the  
 Church, to use all our influence to restore it wherever it is  
 wanting, and to perfect it where it may already exist. And  
 should this be the result of our labours, we would leave a  
 rich legacy to our children, and advance the honour and  
 the cause of Christ more than by any other possible  
 instrumentality.











DATE DUE



